

“Finding Grace in the Wilderness” 2016  
Jeremiah 31:1-7 Luke 19:29-40

Last year the Russian Mayday or Victory Day Parade in Moscow commemorated the defeat of Nazi Germany 70 years ago. It was the largest ever, involving more than 16,000 troops, plus tanks, rocket launchers and fighter jets, all passing by in review as a display of their military power and might. Watching on YouTube, it's all quite impressive, and intended to send a message of strength and domination to the world. **In striking contrast**, the Gospel of Luke describes an entirely different sort of procession, when Jesus Christ, the Son of God who created the universe and all that is, came riding into Jerusalem on a spindly young donkey with his disciples shouting joyfully,

vs. 38

“Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven, and glory in the highest heaven!”

The military parade in Moscow was intended to convey a message of strength and power, **and Luke tells the story about Jesus entering Jerusalem to help us understand and interpret the events of the week, the Passion and meaning of Easter.** \* In Luke's telling of the story, there is no mention of palm branches or the hosannas of a conquering hero. Unlike the other Gospels, the focus is not on a **triumphant entry**, but **the humble obedience** of God's servant coming in peace in fulfillment of God's plan and purpose, our salvation. Though many were hoping for, and even expecting a powerful Messiah to crush and defeat the Roman occupation, that was not why he came, as Jesus explains in Luke 19:10, **For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.** The story actually began back when Jesus and his disciples were still in Bethany, the outskirts of Jerusalem as they were nearing the end of their long journey.

vs. 29-31

When he had come near Bethphage and Bethany, at the place called the Mount of Olives, he sent two of the disciples, saying, “Go into the village ahead of you, and as you enter it you will find tied there a colt that has never been ridden. Untie it and bring it here. If anyone asks you, ‘Why are you untying it?’ just say this, ‘The Lord needs it.’”

That phrase, ‘The Lord needs it’, is more literally translated, “Its Lord or owner needs it”, or **“the one to whom it belongs needs and wants it.”** I very much doubt that Jesus had previously purchased a donkey, **but rather**, the statement should be taken as **a theological claim** based on who Jesus Christ is, and what he came to do. The phrase, *The Lord needs it*, carries the idea that everything belongs to and is under the authority of its true owner... inferring that the donkey and all the contents of **our lives**, really belong to our God who made and blesses each one of us, and who knows us completely and loves us relentlessly ... just as we read earlier in the Heidelberg Catechism: Q. What is your only comfort in life and in death? A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins ... and that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

**That assurance, promise and call is repeated throughout the OT: “I will be your God, and you shall be my people, my chosen, my beloved.”** Each of us are stamped by our Creator with **His image** of ownership. So, “Why are you untying that colt?” - **because the Lord needs it, and it's what the Lord wants.** \*\* **I see that same truth and understanding being lived out here:** Why do you sing in the choir, teach S.S. or serve at all? - **because there is a need, and I believe it's what the Lord wants.** Why do you help out with Salt and Light or visit a shut-in? - **because there is a need, and I believe it's what the Lord wants.** Why do you pray for our church, our leaders or for our mission? - **because there is a need, and I believe it's what the Lord wants.** Why give our money, our time & talents, or share in

church life? - **because there is a need, and I believe it's what the Lord wants. The basis for all of this is our obedient response to God's grace.** It's not that you or I went out seeking the Lord, or that we are working to earn or deserve God's grace, **but rather**, having experienced God's love, blessings and mercy, I want to respond, to grow closer, to obey and **enjoy this God who loves me and who went looking for me and found me even before I knew I was lost.**

As Isaac Watts wrote in a familiar hymn,

*"When I survey the wondrous cross On which the Prince of glory died, My richest gain I count but loss, And pour contempt on all my pride. Were the whole realm of nature mine, That were a present far too small; Love so amazing, so divine demands my soul, my life, my all"*<sup>1</sup>

There is also another theological claim imbedded in this passage. **It is the truth that Jesus was always fully in control.** He was fully aware, knowing in advance all of the details - he knew where the colt would be - he knew what the owners would ask - he knew the disciples would bring it to him. The author of Luke wants to make it very clear, that just as getting the colt was all according to God's plan, **so too, all the other events of the passion story, were also on purpose and exactly as God planned ...** the crucifixion of Jesus was not random or accidental, it was not a flash crowd suddenly caught up in the moment, **but absolutely deliberate, and exactly as God intended.** The perspective given in the Gospel of Luke is that all the way back to the Garden of Eden in the beginning, and all through the writings of the Old Testament, and on past the last word of Revelation on into eternity, **it's been the working out of God's plan and purpose all along, to love, to bless, to save and to show mercy to lost sinners ...** and even though the Pharisees would have liked to hold back the praise and celebration, creation itself is connected and would have cried out were the disciples stifled and silenced.

vs. 39-40

Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to him, "Teacher, order your disciples to stop." He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out."

**The core of this passage is that it's God's purpose and intention**

<sup>1</sup> being fulfilled as God planned before the beginning,

<sup>2</sup> as described by the Hebrew prophets along the way,

<sup>3</sup> and neither the Pharisees, Rome or the world could or can possibly hold back the Good News.

That same crucial message is proclaimed throughout Scripture, as the prophet Jeremiah describes it particularly well:

vs. 31:1, 3

At that time, says the Lord, I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be my people. Thus says the Lord: ... I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you.

Those words of Jeremiah were addressed to **the remnant of Israel**, to a captive people crushed and taken in exile to Babylon, whose world had been shattered, and to whom in their discouragement, disappointment and defeat ... **all seemed hopeless and lost forever. But the word "forever" far more accurately describes God's love, purpose, compassion and faithfulness, than it does human suffering, struggle and loss, for in time, the Babylonian captivity did end ... so too, the coming of Jesus means and assures us that our struggles, our tears, defeats and losses ... will also in time come to an end...** as promised in

Rev. 22:3-4

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<sup>1</sup> Isaac Watts, 1674-1748, "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross", vs. 1, 4.

the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

The message of the Jeremiah text is the Lord's declaration, and the truth we can see being enacted in Luke's Gospel is that **I will be your God, I love you and you are mine**. I am the God of Exodus who heard the cries of my people and by grace led you through the wilderness journey ... to make your home and dwell in the Promised Land. This whole section of the book of Jeremiah is a bold declaration of joyful promise and hope for a people defeated in exile. And looking back through history, we know the Lord did fulfill and exceed all those promises. Our salvation, which is God's **forever love** for us which has always been active, both present and coming, and cannot be silenced or held back by anyone ... **for it is God's relentless love and continuing call of grace**. Today, for us, as we are moving into Holy Week, as we are confronted by the terrible, the blood and cruelty of the inhumane suffering and death that Jesus endured, **it serves to remind us** of the depths of sin and depravity, and why we need a Savior to accomplish what we cannot. This Luke passage makes it very clear that all those events were indeed a necessary part of God's plan to save us all because of God's extraordinary love for us ... and not some random or accidental circumstance.

All that Jesus suffered and endured, even betrayal and death, were to solve our problem of sin and its consequences, because God loves us, wants to save us and bless us. The critical message of these two passages today, is that even after all the horror that was done to Jesus Christ, the words in Jeremiah are still God's promise to us: vs. 3 **I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. \* This is our hope, the word of God that makes all the difference**. These are not easy days for many, as they are dealing with difficult problems, or feeling hopeless and discouraged. There are many today, who are worried, wounded and struggling, but into whatever darkness we face, Jesus has promised,

John 8:12

"I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life."

When I think of that steadfast faithfulness and the love of God I am reminded of an image that goes back to my childhood, from when I was a boy growing up in Massachusetts. In those days, my brother and I used to chase and play running around on some huge boulders the size of trucks that overlooked the ocean near Gloucester and Cape Ann ... where no doubt my great, great-grandfather also played as boy, and where for ages upon ages, force upon force, the crashing waves of violent ocean storms have pounded. When I was last up there, several of the hotels and man-made structures of my youth have been swept away by storms, perhaps many times. **However, those boulders hadn't changed or shifted at all, but have remained constant and unmoved ... and I am pretty sure God's gracious steadfast love and mercy, God's promises are something like that... only more so ...** as the prophet Jeremiah wrote:

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. ... (For) I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you. (Jer. 29:11, 31:3)